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ABSTRACT

General education is the process of developing a framework on which to place knowledge stemming from a variety of sources. Its goals are to help students think critically, develop values, understand traditions, respect diverse cultures and opinions, and, most importantly, put that knowledge to use. Even though its goals parallel socially supported values, general education has met with opposition within the academic community. Examples of the problems encountered by general education include the following: (1) it is difficult to measure whether a general education program has fulfilled its goals, since changes in students' actions beyond the institution do not lend themselves to assessment by easily administered and scored examinations; (2) the organizational structure of community colleges, based on the university pattern of academic departments, is antithetical to general education; and (3) universities have not been supportive in granting transfer credit for general education courses. In addition, some educators openly oppose general education requirements, arguing that students with specific and limited educational goals do not have the time for such courses. However, the community college's mission and the characteristics of its students both support arguments favoring general education for all students. To provide common learning, most institutions have developed some type of course distribution list with offerings arrayed under the major headings of science, social science, humanities, and communication. A less widespread approach involves an attenuated list of interdisciplinary courses that fulfill general education requirements. Despite barriers on one hand and the innovative contributions of certain colleges on the other, the prognosis for general education is no better or worse than it has been at any other time in the history of the community college. (AJL)

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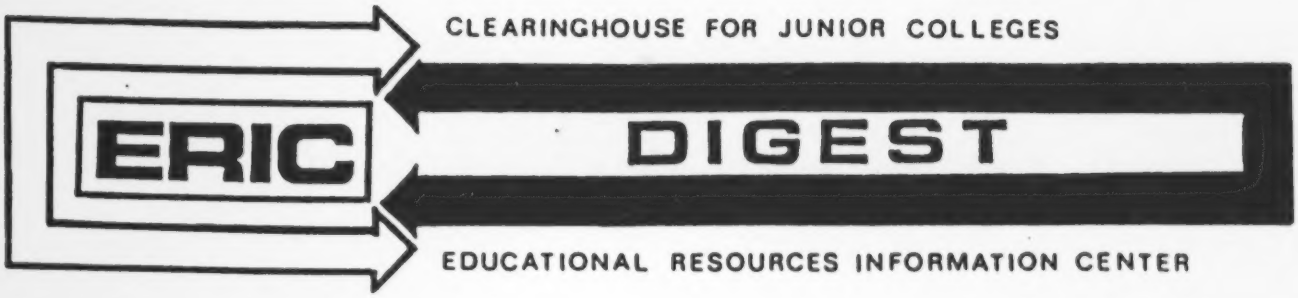

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CLEARINGHOUSE FOR JUNIOR COLLEGES

ERIC DIGEST

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GENERAL EDUCATION AND THE COMMUNITY COLLEGE

Arthur M. Cohen

Two persistent ideas -- general education and the community college -- arose simultaneously early in this century. The concept of a general education curriculum took root as a reformation of the free elective system in undergraduate education at the same time that the community college began to thrive by accommodating the masses of students seeking postsecondary studies. The progress of both of these reforms has been intertwined, although the community college has been the more pervasive of the two. This Digest examines the status of general education within the two-year college.

Definition

General education is the process of developing a framework on which to place knowledge stemming from various sources. Its goals are to help students think critically, develop values, understand traditions, respect diverse cultures and opinions, and most important, put that knowledge to use. It is holistic, not specialized; integrative, not fractioned; suitable less for abstract contemplation than for application.

In general education, knowledge is power -- the power of coping, understanding, mastering the self and social interaction. General education is grounded in the everyday affairs of a person: dealing with supervisors and co-workers, choosing associates, coping with family problems, and spending leisure time in socially desirable and personally satisfying ways.

The perennial issues in general education can be summed under three headings: How should it be presented? Who should take it? and How will we know when it has been attained?

How Should General Education Be Presented

General education in the community college is furthered in the ways pervasive in all higher education. Lists of noble outcomes are drawn up and published in the catalogs. The "well-functioning citizen in a democracy," the person with a "satisfactory home and family life" and "vocational adjustment" who applies "critical judgment to social issues" is the desired outcome.

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To attain these ends, most institutions rely on some type of course distribution list with offerings arrayed under the major headings of science, social science, humanities, and communication. Any number of particularized courses may be listed in each category, and the courses may or may not correspond with the others in the category. Students fulfill their general education requirements, which usually total 30 of the 60 units required for an associate degree, by taking two or three courses from each list.

A less widespread approach to general education requirements involves an attenuated list of courses with not more than one or two choices in each broad disciplinary category. Here the faculty members have come together to create interdisciplinary courses with such titles as, "The Art of Being Human," as the humanities requirement, and "The Nature of the Environment," as the science requirement. For example, Kirkwood Community College (Iowa) has developed an integrated humanities program to replace a previously offered set of disconnected courses (1986). Valencia Community College (Florida) has developed an interdisciplinary studies program based upon a two-year core curriculum organized chronologically (Valencia Community College, 1984). Monroe Community College's (New York) interdisciplinary program centers on human ecology (Harrison, 1987).

Who Should Take General Education Courses

The role of the community college in providing access to higher education for an adult population that might otherwise not have the opportunity to attend college supports the argument on behalf of general education for all students. General education ensures literacy, and many community college students need such instruction. Broad-scale courses in intercultural and social problems have proved attractive for adults pursuing personal interests. Integrating the humanities in occupational courses by teaching business ethics, languages, and intercultural perspectives has proved useful.

The argument that some students want particular skills only and will not sit still for general education can be accommodated by allowing such students to take a limited number of courses. After having reached the limit, they are prevented from registering until they have declared a curricular intention and entered a program leading to an associate degree. If students are allowed to take a random walk through the curriculum, with the college acting merely as a passive resource, no form of general education can make headway.

Voicing a common misconception, Gaff (1983) speaks about community colleges as institutions "designed to meet community needs" with students who "tend to be vocationally oriented." These students "are interested in practical learning rather than abstract thinking" (p. 17). Even this characterization of community colleges points toward general education. What does the community need more than people who have a sense of historical continuity, a broad base of understanding, and shared values? What is more vocationally valuable than a sense of the subtleties of language and an appreciation of human diversity? What learning has more practical use than knowing how to function in a complexity of government regulations and corporate gigantism?

Outcomes

The most nagging questions of all come up when educators seek ways of measuring the outcomes of general education. Since the conceptual basis for

general education rests on the students' action beyond the walls of the institution, measurement is beyond the capacity of most colleges. How do we know when a student will act as a responsible citizen? lead a satisfying home life? adjust well in a job situation? apply critical judgment to social issues?

Can surrogate measures be imposed? Some moves in the direction of general education competency requirements have been made, but few colleges have installed them. General education does not lend itself to easily administered and scored examinations. Faculty, who are rarely eager to yield the prerogatives of the classroom to some examining committee, represent an additional barrier. Perhaps most important, if some measure of student competency is a requisite for demonstrating general education, then the students should be allowed to demonstrate that ability whether or not they have enrolled in any of the general education classes.

Antagonisms

The goals of general education parallel socially supported values. The public, governmental agencies, and employers all expect colleges to assist students in learning those skills and attitudes necessary for participation in a democratic society. Survey after survey shows that employers want workers who can understand written and verbal communication, are aware of what is going on around them, know the rules of American society, and have a sense for interpersonal relations. Governmental officials appreciate people whose position on public issues stems from a base of information rather than from temporal emotion. If general education is such a good idea, why is it not more vigorously pursued?

Opposition to general education comes primarily from within the academy. The organizational structure of the colleges, based on the university pattern of academic departments, is antithetical to general education. The departments, which offer convenient housings for scholars pursuing inquiry in specialized disciplines, have little to do with teaching people to function effectively as citizens.

Some of the opposition is deliberate and purposeful, as when educators with a genuine commitment to an academic or occupational specialization insist that there is no time for students to study non-essential subjects. Some of it is inadvertent, as when a commentator says that, as individuals with unique needs and objectives, students should all choose their own lines of study, with nothing required for everyone to learn. Some of these commentators dwell on the ethnicity of the students as of it were somehow wrong to teach science to Black students, social science to Asians, or English to Hispanics. Are members of ethnic minorities not participants in the polity?

Nor have the universities been supportive. Numerous attempts to specify a core of offerings acceptable to the senior institutions have yielded little. California's efforts are illustrative; the University's Academic Senate approved a "transfer core" curriculum but assured the faculty on each campus that it did "not affect prerequisites for majors, or such upper-division courses as are prescribed by differing campuses or programs" (Notice, 1988). Such caveats have destroyed general education transfer plans repeatedly in one state after another.

Current and Future Status

A few institutions have pursued general education holistically. Los Medanos College (California) built generic courses in behavioral, social, biological, and physical sciences and in language arts and humanistic studies. Its general education plan is notable for the way it was organized: there was administrative coordination of the curriculum; each course was required for all degree-seeking students; the college employed a full-time staff development officer to work closely with the faculty in preparing the common course outlines. The result was that a college drawing its student population predominantly from a low-socioeconomic-status community with a high proportion of ethnic minorities sustained an integrated general education curriculum (Collins and Drexel, 1976; Case, 1988).

The prognosis for general education is no better or worse than it has been at any time in the community college's history. On the positive side are contemporary moves toward teaching critical thinking and writing across the curriculum. Anything that unifies and synthesizes the fragmented disciplinary approach codified in academic departments is a move toward general education. Steps toward institutional outcomes assessment also suggest general education because any form of measurement that reaches across the student body touches on general education principles. Statewide efforts to build a common core curriculum across colleges or between community colleges and neighboring universities is a third positive move.

General education would thrive most vigorously if the faculty were reorganized so that the responsibility for it lay directly on one division. This group would plan the integrative courses and present them in credit and noncredit, academic transfer and occupational programs. It would also organize the collegewide student assessments. General education needs its own home base.

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